

Arts Education @ the Edge of the Net: The Future Will Be Moist!

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THE MOISTMEDIA MANIFESTO

MOIST ART is digitally dry, biologically wet, and spiritually numinous

MOIST MEDIA comprises bits, atoms, neurons, molecules and genes

MOIST MEDIA is interactive and psychoactive

MOIST SPACE is where dry pixels and wet molecules converge

MOIST REALITY combines Virtual Reality with Vegetal Reality

MOIST LIFE embraces digital identity and biological being

MOIST MIND is technoetic multiconsciousness

MOISTWARE erodes the boundary between hardware and wetware

MOIST MANUFACTURE is tele-biotic and nano-robotic

MOIST ENGINEERING embraces ontology

MOIST DESIGN is bottom-up, seeded, and emergent

MOIST COMMS are bio-telematic and psi-bernetic

MOIST ART is at the edge of the Net!

Just as the development of interactive media in the last century transformed the world of print and broadcasting, and replaced the cult of the objet d'art and linear narrative with a process-based culture, so throughout this century we shall see a further artistic shift, as silicon and pixels merge with molecules and matter. Between the dry world of virtuality and the wet world of biology lies a moist domain, a new interspace of potentiality and promise for the creative mind, and one that will demand a total revision of the pedagogies and practices of arts education. Moistmedia (comprising bits, atoms, neurons, and genes in every kind of combination) will constitute the substrate of the art of our century, a transformative art concerned with the construction of a fluid reality. This will

mean the spread of intelligence through ubiquitous computing to every part of the built environment coupled with recognition of the intelligence that lies within every part of the living planet. This burgeoning awareness is technoetic: techne and gnosis combined into a new knowledge of the world, a connective mind that will spawn new realities and new definitions of life and human identity.

As Multimedia gives way to Moistmedia, and interactive art takes on a more psychoactive complexion, consciousness will remain the great mystery, just as intelligent artificial life remains the great challenge. For some years now artists working at the edge of the Net have been exploring the nature of consciousness and the potential of artificial life. As the century progresses

these explorations will intensify. At the same time science will become increasingly subjective as first-person methodologies develop. I foresee art and science co-mingling in this dance of objectivity and subjectivity. This will call for imaginative institutional responses and learning initiatives led by new research strategies. As art becomes increasingly more constructive and collaborative, the expressive and private art of the old industrial culture, with its anxiety, loneliness, alienation, and excessive paranoia will give way to *telenoia*, the celebration of worldwide connectivity and multicultural interaction. I foresee the insertion of a new but very ancient technology, that of psychoactive plants, with their sacred, healing and mind enhancing powers. A sort of *cyberbotany* may arise, with a special interest in non-ordinary states of consciousness, supported by exact science. It is my contention that *Vegetal Reality* and *Virtual Reality* will combine to create a new ontology, just as our notions of outer space and inner space will coalesce into another order of cosmography. Arts education will adapt or die. I think probably it will undergo a surging renaissance as young people realize that planetary commerce and interchange can be dominated not by the soulless multinationals but by fearless entrepreneurs for whom reality building is both

an art and a living. Even today, the start-up culture can be seen as a form of conceptual art and the IPO as a gallery opening. Clearly the traps and trappings of classical art education, with its historically overheated concern with composition, closure, stability, resolution, and permanence (in short, *nature morte*) will give way to the joy of what is incomplete, uncertain, unstable, fleeting, immaterial, on the fly, open-ended, and living.

The key for students and their teachers to understand this new state of being is to see that language is not merely a device for communicating ideas about the world but rather a tool for bringing the world into existence. Twenty-first century arts will increasingly be seen as a form of world building, of mind construction, of self-creation, whether through digital programming, genetic coding, interactive performance, imaging, sound work, simulation, or hyper-mediated construction in general. For the artist simply to reiterate received language, uncreatively and uncritically, is to renounce the idea that we can rethink ourselves and our world and to accede to the notion that in matters of reality our minds are made up for us. In Richard Rorty's words, "To create one's mind is to create one's own language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by language other human beings have left behind."² Rorty eschews the sanctity of philosophy in favor of the artist's visionary impulse and search for metaphor that leads to the continual creation of reality and of the self, thereby denying the passive acceptance of any canonical description. Similarly, many artists escape the constraints of artistic identity by straying freely in the speculative zones of science and technology, mysticism and philosophy. Breaking free of categories, intellectually and emotionally, and constructing new realities, new language, and new practices is what I term *visionary pragmatism*.

How then will the arts academies adapt? In adopting a position of Visionary Pragmatism, I believe we shall see the emergence of a *Planetary Collegium*, a worldwide organism of learn-

Cultural Shift	
from	to
Content	Context
Object	Process
Perspective	Immersion
Figure/ground	Pattern
Paranoia	Telenoia
Aesthetics	Technoetics
Nature	Artificial life
Certainty	Contingency
Resolution	Emergency
Reception	Negotiation
Representation	Construction
Hermeneutics	Heuristic
Tunnel vision	Bird's eye view
Observed reality	Constructed reality
Autonomous brain	Distributed mind
Behavior of forms	Forms of behavior
Immaterialism	Re-materialization
Perception	Cyberception

ing and research, calling on vast archives of knowledge, aided by search tools capable of supremely high bandwidth subtlety, and linking mind to mind at all levels of sophistication and experience. Art may not be recognized as a subset of this network. Indeed current academic disciplines and categories of practice will be eroded well before midcentury, and will give way to hybrids of thought and behavior as yet unimaginable save for the emergence of Moistmedia as the substrate of both noetic exploration and new approaches to the material universe. This cultural shift spells out a new artistic canon as illustrated in the chart above.

The new sensibility that informs this shift in objectives and which in turn is shaped by it will affect all the arts and indeed the whole of human behavior. It replaces the historical sense of the artist's role as an "honorable calling" with the idea of such work as a "transformative vocation"—a concept central to the theory of society of Roberto Mangabiera Unger, the Brazilian thinker and Harvard professor of law. His program for social reconstruction shows how, against the idea of work as purely instrumental or as an honorable calling, a third idea of work has appeared in the world. "It connects self-fulfillment and transformation: the change of any aspect of the practical or

imaginative settings of the individual's life. To be fully a person, in this conception, you must engage in a struggle against the defects of the limits of existing society or available knowledge."³

This struggle is the eternal struggle of the artist, and during this century the arts in education will be called upon increasingly to prepare people for that struggle. This is the value of a truly visionary pragmatism: it's about out-thinking present constraints in favor of a dream, then bringing that dream to earth. It's about flying with your feet on the ground. At its most efficacious, it combines, within the artistic domain, the perennial wisdom of shamans and gnostics with contemporary insights of scientists, engineers and philosophers. Visionary pragmatism finds in Moistmedia its creative ally, with its triad of computational exactitude, biological fluidity, and technoetic complexity. Visionary pragmatism, the defining attribute of culture in the twenty-first century, will push the consequences of a screen-based, immaterial world into the *re-materialization* of culture involving molecules and atoms, nanotechnology and neurons. It will reverse the debilitating nihilism and despair of late postmodernism and spawn a post-biological culture invested with a sense of radical constructivism. It's a case of "Bye-bye Baudrillard," and signals a reversal of the sense of terminal decline that characterized art at the end of the millennium.

Notes

1. From the installation "MOIST" presented at *gr2000az*, Graz, Austria, May 2000.
2. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
3. R. M. Unger, *Politics: The Central Texts, Theory against Fate* (London: Verso, 1997).

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